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证婚人: A Memoir

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While living in Shanghai last year, Jacob Dreyer found himself working as a 证婚人 [zhenghunren] in one of the city's many wedding facilities. Translated as "wedding officiant," "priest for weddings," or "wedding witness," zhenghunren has no real equivalent in the West. The role involves leading the wedding ceremony, but there is no need for a zhenghunren to be certified or authorized to perform weddings — which is one reason Dreyer was able to slip into the position so easily.



By Jacob Dreyer

Shanghai, September 2009. It was the time of year when it was just beginning to be crisp. At a party at night, you got your jacket off of the couch when you went outside to smoke. My friend M. and I stood on a balcony gazing into an endless sea of lights, building sites, and peasants maneuvering bicycles between it all. "I'm going back to Australia for a bit, to register my business ... I was wondering if you could do me a favor," he said, giving me a cigarette. It didn't take much time for us to adjust to Chinese habits; while we were foreign, we were also two 20-year-olds come to the big city to make our fortunes, and naturally adapted to accepting the proffered cigarettes, and to doing strange favors for devious motives, so I naturally agreed without hearing what it was. "Meet me at People's Square metro tomorrow at 2," he said, and we went back inside.

The next day, both of our faces, slightly stubbled, had the strange dry feeling that a face does the day after drinking, a dehydration not yet compensated for. We exchanged a few words, but were mostly silent as we went deep into Pudong, a region I typically avoided; for me, Pudong is the most repulsive area of Shanghai. Lujiazui is one thing, but the endless, Houstonian landscapes make me fear that modern Chinese people are learning to fear each other as much as we have long done in the USA. At Deping Road, line 6, we got off, and walked onto a highway only sparsely populated with traffic. A typical Pudongnese vista; some tacky hotels and other glistening buildings here and there, hardware stores, various individuals selling fried bread, tangerine peels on the sidewalk — and, a château? A chintzy building, with a sign that declared (ungrammatically) it to be the Villa D'Roman — we pushed through gates and found ourselves in a reception room, featuring a table laid with cookies, lychees, and soft drinks; a hubbub of chatting middle-aged people dressed in clothing that was simultaneously formal yet vulgar. M. brusquely went into a room to the side and got a black folder, and explained, "I marry people here, each time for 500RMB. I give this speech," indicating the characters with pinyin underneath in his book, "and then that's it. It's really easy, good money — watch me, so when I leave, you can do it."

I was quite dazed by the concept, and had to return the next weekend to watch him again. No matter how many ceremonies I observed, though, I was still nervous the first time that it was my turn. Freshly attired in an ill-fitting suit from the fabric market, I strode down a red rug of synthetic material, reminiscent of the tees at a mini-golf club.” “ 先生们 · 女士人 ; 今天美好的生日” [*"Ladies and gentlemen, today is a lovely day"*], I said, or something like that (Hey, it was my first time). I rushed through the 20-minute speech, and noticed a few glares at my incompetence. Men started answering their cellphones, and one elderly gentleman lit a cigar. In the end, the groom kissed the bride (the one part of the oration spoken in English was the phrase, "you may now kiss the bride"), and everybody filed out to be sprinkled with flower petals.

After a few more weddings, I quickly grew confident. I discovered how to say what I was reciting, what to emphasize, where to pause, where to let my voice tremble with emotion. As I learned more Chinese, I even began to understand what I was theoretically saying. As people filed out for the flowers bit, and everybody thanked me, old men and children would curiously ask me, "Where did you learn Chinese? When did you decide to become a 证婚人 [wedding officiant]?" Actually, I didn't know the answer myself; the closest I got to ever learning was when my boss suggested that it was a result of the movie *Sex and the City* debuting in China, but I knew from my friend that the tradition of *laowais* [foreigners] performing marriage dated back to 2005.

I still don't know, and my suit (complete with white shirt tucked inside, worn only during wedding ceremonies — the armpits sweaty not from heat, but nervousness, though nobody ever smelled, as the atmosphere was far too redolent of aromatherapeutic candles laid out before) remains in the upper floor of the Villa D'Roman, waiting for my return. My friend tells me he's trying to renegotiate our salary to 800RMB per time. That way, four weddings a month, and we'd have a decent lifestyle already. When I was growing up, my mother, who used to work as a social worker in Newark (where burning Pampers were regularly flung out of windows at her), would describe any bizarre phenomena as being "only in New Jersey." Well... if what I did could only happen in Pudong, does that finally make Shanghai the New York of the 21st century?

Jacob Dreyer, an American, lived and worked in China, primarily Shanghai but also in Suzhou, Beijing and Kunming, from August 2008-August 2009. Presently pursuing a Master's degree at the London Consortium, his work is about the creation of a new discourse about Shanghai via architecture, and Shanghai's quirks more generally. He intends to return to China in August 2010 — this time, for good.